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From trimming the truth to lies in the Iran-contra scandal

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WASHINGTON - At the end of Monday's hearing into the Iran-contra scandal, Robert McFarlane, the former national security adviser, said that he had been in on the Watergate affair in the Nixon administration, and that people involved who didn't intend to lie did so.

It almost applies to the current affair. Some of those involved lied for the good of the nation, some lied to keep information from becoming public property, and others just plain lied.

But, as McFarlane said, there are those like himself who begin to trim - trim the truth, that is - and once they begin, the nose gets bigger and bigger with every lie.

It is what the Iran-contra scandal is all about. They lied to each other, and, in the end, President Reagan lied to the American people because the affair was so bizarre, no president could tell the

American people what really happened because to do so would cost him his credibility.

Almost painfully, McFarlane described how his good friend, Lt. Col. Oliver North, had led him down the garden path. It was August 1985, and Congress was raising questions about the US activities in Central America. Had North been a part of the fund-raising activities for the contras fighting against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua?

North told his boss and friend, McFarlane, that he didn't take part, that he had advised all with whom he met (about 100 groups) that he was a US official and could not engage in such things as soliciting funds for the contras; but, said McFarlane, North told him that he told the groups with whom he met that they could take their money to the contra outfit in Miami. He lied.

Questioned by McFarlane about setting up military structures for the contras, North said he did not help them - that they had hired retired military officers to advise them. He lied.

McFarlane said he should have been "more probing" with North. He knew he lied.

Twenty-five years ago, I was in the basement of the White House in the quarters of the National Security Council during the crisis in Laos when President Kennedy was dealing with communist forces, with a CIA-backed operation and with a neutralist force in Laos. The space that the NSC occupied was about what it is today.

But there is a major difference in the operation in that space. Today there are color codes so that those with one colored ticket are entitled to only certain information. It is called compartmentalization. It is an old Central Intelligence trick: splitting up information so that only the director of the operation knows everything. Everyone else has only a piece.

The problem is that if there is trouble in the basement of the White House, if

something has really gone wrong, there is no one to turn to. That is the system there today. It doesn't even serve the purpose for which it was established, for secrecy sake, and, as the Iran-contra scandal shows, it was a disaster.

There is also the terrible arrogance of the players. The message of Maj. Gen. Richard Secord was one of total arrogance. How dare the members of the committee question the \$8 million that was being held by his company from the sale of arms to the Iranians. He never intended to keep a nickel of it. It was in a Swiss bank account.

And about the operations with the Iranians and contras, why should Secord's inside gang tell members of the Congress what they were doing. Congress and the people really had no business knowing anything. What gall.

But at the center of this operation was the president. That is what the Secord and McFarlane testimony tells us. The president was always the driving force. It was Reagan who decided to pay ransom for the hostages in bribes and other payments; at the same time he was telling the American people that he would not pay ransom to anyone for the release of US hostages.

It was Reagan who was the force in the White House to keep the contra military operation alive in Central America when the law that the president had signed specifically forbade lethal aid to the contras. It was the president who said, "Do it," and asked not for the details of how it was done.

It was, in a word, a conspiracy. When the conspiracy was revealed, there was a period of grace granted by Attorney General Edwin Meese for the conspirators to destroy the evidence - what McFarlane quoted Col. North as terming a "shredding party."

It is not the way to run a government.

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